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(54) Vehicle having power operated liftgate

(57) A vehicle has a power operated liftgate (12) and at least one power unit (20) comprising a fixed linear guide channel (24) and a follower (30) that moves in the guide channel. The follower (30) is universally connected to a rod (34) at one end and the opposite end of the rod is universally connected to the vehicle lift gate. A flexible drive loop (46, 56 or 58) which is attached to the follower wraps part way around two pulleys (42, 44) at opposite ends of the guide channel. The flexible drive loop is driven by a bi-directional drive unit (48) that includes a reversible electric motor (49), an electromagnetic clutch (52) and a drive wheel (50) that engages the flexible drive loop. The flexible drive loop may be a drive cable (56), a drive tape (58), or a drive chain (46) or a combination of cable, tape and/or chain.

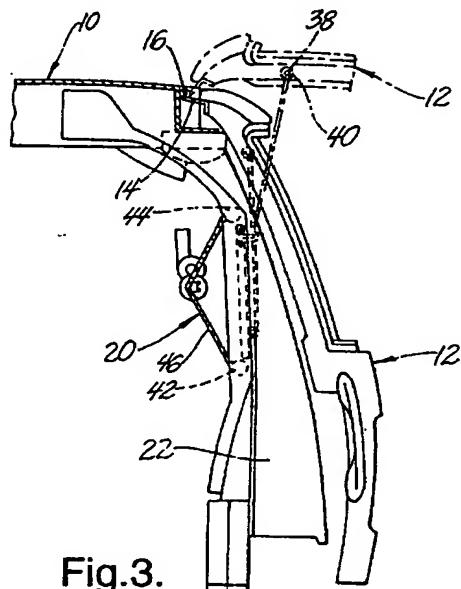


Fig.3.

Description**TECHNICAL FIELD**

[0001] This invention relates to a vehicle having a power operated liftgate that is pivotally attached to a vehicle roof for pivotal movement about a generally horizontal hinge axis and more particularly to a vehicle having a power operated liftgate that is moved from a fully closed position to a fully open position and from an open position to a fully closed position.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] Sport utility vehicles, vans and the like that are equipped with liftgates that are hinged at the top about a generally horizontal hinge axis are used by large numbers of people today. Some of these liftgates are large and heavy. Their size and weight make some liftgates difficult to open and close. Some of the liftgates are also a great distance above the ground when they are fully opened. Their height above the ground makes them very difficult for some people to close. For these and other reasons many people would like to have a power operating system for opening and closing the liftgate.

[0003] U.S. Patent No. 4,903,435 granted to Werner Bittmann et al February 27, 1990 discloses a device for motorized opening and closing of pivotal body panels of motor vehicles comprising an actuation rod that is pivotally attached to the pivotal body panel at one end and to a slide block at the opposite end. The slide block is moved in an inclined linear track by a control cable that is moved in a closed loop by a cable drum driven by an electric motor. The Bittmann '435 device is bulky and cumbersome and relies on gravity to fully close the pivotal body panel.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0004] The invention provides a vehicle that has an improved power operated liftgate that is moved about a hinge axis between a generally horizontal open position and a closed generally vertical position by at least one power unit. The power unit has a fixed linear guide channel, a follower that moves in the guide channel, and a rod that is attached to the liftgate and the follower. The follower has a universal connector that is universally connected to a mating universal connector at one end of the rod. The rod has a second universal connector at an opposite end that is universally connected to the vehicle liftgate.

[0005] There is a first pulley at one end of the guide channel and a second pulley at an opposite end of the guide channel. A flexible drive loop is attached to the follower, the flexible drive loop wrapping around part of the first pulley and part of the second pulley. A bi-directional drive unit engages the flexible drive loop and drives the flexible drive loop in one direction to move the

lift gate to the open position and in an opposite direction to move the lift gate to the closed position. The flexible drive loop may be a drive cable, a drive tape or a drive chain in which case the pulleys are preferably sprockets.

5 5 The flexible drive loop is driven by a bi-directional drive unit that preferably includes a reversible electric motor, an electromagnetic clutch driven by the reversible electric motor, and a drive wheel (50) driven by the electromagnetic clutch that drivingly engages the flexible drive loop. The fixed linear guide channel may be attached to a vertical pillar of the vehicle with the fixed linear guide channel having an elongated vertical slot and the follower having a universal connector that projects through the slot.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0006] The presently preferred embodiment of the invention is disclosed in the following description and in 10 the accompanying drawings, wherein:

15 Figure 1 is a fragmentary rear view of a vehicle equipped with a power operated liftgate in accordance with the invention;
 20 Figure 2 is a fragmentary rear view of the vehicle of figure 1 showing the power operated liftgate in the open position;
 25 Figure 3 is a section view of the vehicle taken substantially along the line 3-3 of figure 1 looking in the direction of the arrows;
 30 Figure 4 is a section view of the vehicle taken substantially along the line 4-4 of figure 2 looking in the direction of the arrows;
 35 Figure 5 is a fragmentary perspective view of an alternate drive loop for the power operated liftgate shown in figures 1-4; and
 Figure 6 is a fragmentary perspective view of another alternate drive loop for the power operated liftgate shown in figures 1-4.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF A PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

[0007] Referring now to the drawings, vehicle 10 has 45 a liftgate 12 that is attached to the aft end of the vehicle roof by two hinge assemblies 14. Hinge assemblies 14 have hinge portions that are secured to a roof channel of the vehicle 10 and hinge portions that are secured to liftgate 12 so that liftgate 12 pivots about a substantially horizontal hinge axis 16 between a closed position shown in figures 1 and 3 and an open position shown in figures 2 and 4. Liftgate 12 is generally permitted to pivot about 90° about the substantially horizontal hinge axis 18 16. However, the range of movement can be varied substantially from one model of vehicle to another.

[0008] Liftgate 12 is opened and closed manually or by a suitable power operating system comprising two identical power units 20 that are installed in the aft end

of the vehicle body at the respective vertical body pillars 22, commonly referred to as the D pillars, that define the width of the rear opening that is closed by liftgate 12. The typical power unit 20 is shown in greater detail in figure 4.

[0009] Each power unit 20 comprises a fixed rectangular guide channel 24 that is fixed to a body portion of the vehicle by a bracket, fastener, weldment of the like (not shown) at or near the D pillar 22 in a vertical orientation. The rectangular guide channel 24 has an elongated vertical slot 26 in a rearward facing wall 28 of the guide channel 24 that faces toward tailgate 12 when tailgate 12 is in the closed position.

[0010] A follower 30 is disposed in the guide channel 24 and moves vertically in the guide channel. Follower 30 has a universal connector in the form of a ball stud 32 that projects through slot 26. A rod 34 has a mating universal connector in the form of a socket 36 at one end that receives the ball stud 32 so that rod 34 is universally connected to follower 30. Rod 30 has a socket 38 at an opposite end that is universally connected to a mating ball stud 40 attached to a side wall of the vehicle lift gate 12. It should be understood that any type of universal connector can be used between rod 34 and follower 30 at one end of rod 34 and between rod 34 and liftgate 12 at the other end of rod 34 and that the positions of the ball studs and the sockets of the ball joints 32, 36 and 38, 40 of illustrated example can be reversed.

[0011] Power unit 20 further comprises a first pulley 42 at a lower end of the guide channel 24 and a second pulley 44 at an upper end of the guide channel. A flexible drive loop in the form of a drive chain 46 extends into the upper and lower open ends of guide channel 24. The opposite ends of drive chain 46 are attached to the opposite ends of follower 30 so that drive chain 46 is in effect, endless. Pulleys 42 and 44 (which are preferably idler sprockets when a drive chain is used) are aligned with rectangular guide channel 24 so that drive chain 46 wraps part way around lower pulley 42 and part way around upper pulley 44 before extending into the opposite open ends of guide channel 24.

[0012] Power unit 20 further comprises a bi-directional drive unit 48 having a drive wheel in the form of a drive sprocket 50 that drivingly engages an exterior portion of drive chain 46 outside of guide channel 24. Drive sprocket 50 drives drive chain 46 in one direction to move liftgate 12 to the open position and in an opposite direction to move liftgate 12 to the closed position. Drive unit is preferably located so that drive sprocket is equidistant from pulleys 42 and 44 as shown in figure 4.

[0013] Bi-directional drive unit 48 includes a reversible electric motor 49 and preferably an electromagnetic clutch 52. Electromagnetic clutch is driven by reversible electric motor 49 via a suitable gear set and drive sprocket 50 is driven by electromagnetic clutch 52 through a second suitable gear set.

[0014] The operation of the power operating system is as follows. When liftgate 12 is in the open position as

shown in figure 2, in phantom in figure 3 and in figure 4, follower 30 is at or near the top of the elongated slot 26 in guide channel 24 as best shown in figure 4. To close

liftgate 12 motor 49 and electromagnetic clutch 52 are energized to rotate drive sprocket 50 counterclockwise as viewed in figure 4. This moves drive chain 46 counterclockwise in the loop defined by pulleys 42, 44 and drive sprocket 50 and pulls follower 30 down in guide channel 24. As follower 30 is pulled down, liftgate 12 is moved toward the closed position by rod 34. Follower 30 is pulled down in guide channel 24 until liftgate is closed at which time follower 30 is positioned at or near the bottom of elongated slot 26 in guide channel 24 as shown in figures 1 and 3 and in phantom in figure 4.

15 When liftgate is closed, a limit switch or the like is actuated to deenergize motor 49 and electromagnetic clutch 52.

[0015] The closed liftgate 12 shown in figures 1 and 3 is opened by energizing motor 49 and electromagnetic clutch 52 to rotate drive sprocket 50 clockwise as viewed in figure 4. This moves drive chain 46 clockwise in its loop and pulls follower 24 up in guide channel 24. As follower 30 is pulled up, liftgate 12 is moved toward the open position by rod 34. Follower 30 is pulled up in guide

25 channel 24 until liftgate is opened at which time follower 30 is positioned at or near the top of elongated slot 26 in guide channel 24 as shown in figures 2 and 4. When liftgate 12 is opened, a limit switch or the like is actuated to deenergize motor 49 and electromagnetic clutch 52.

30 [0016] The electromagnetic clutch 52 is deenergized after the liftgate 12 is opened or closed to facilitate manual opening and closing of the liftgate 12 in the event of power failure. However, the electromagnetic clutch can be eliminated so long as the bi-directional electric motor 49 can be back driven by manual movement of the tailgate in the event of a power failure.

[0017] While the flexible drive loop is illustrated as being a drive chain 46, any flexible drive member can be used, such as a drive cable 56 or a slotted drive tape 58 that are shown in figures 5 and 6 respectively. In such instances, pulleys 42 and 44 would be modified to cooperate with the drive cable 56 or slotted drive tape 58. In other words, while the present invention has been described as carried out in a specific embodiment thereof, it is not intended to be limited thereby but is intended to cover the invention broadly within the scope and spirit of the appended claims.

50 Claims

1. A vehicle having a power operated liftgate (12) that is pivotally attached to an aft end of a vehicle roof for pivotal movement about a hinge axis (16) between a generally horizontal open position and a closed generally vertical position, a fixed linear guide channel (24), a follower (30) that moves in the guide channel, and a rod (34) that is attached to the

liftgate and the follower, characterized in that:

the follower (30) has a universal connector (32),
 the rod (34) has a mating universal connector
 (36) at one end that is universally connected to
 the universal connector of the follower,
 the rod has a second universal connector (38)
 at an opposite end that is universally connected
 to the vehicle liftgate,
 a first pulley (42) is at one end of the guide 10
 channel,
 a second pulley (44) is at an opposite end of
 the guide channel,
 a flexible drive loop (46, 56, 58) is attached to
 the follower, the flexible drive loop wrapping
 around part of the first pulley and part of the
 second pulley, and
 a bi-directional drive unit (48) engages the flex-
 15ible drive loop for driving the flexible drive loop
 in one direction to move the lift gate to the open
 position and in an opposite direction to move
 the lift gate to the closed position.

2. The vehicle as defined in claim 1 characterized in
 that the flexible drive loop is a drive cable (56). 25

3. The vehicle as defined in claim 1 characterized in
 that the flexible drive loop is a drive tape (58).

4. The vehicle as defined in claim 1 characterized in
 that the flexible drive loop is a drive chain (46) and
 the first pulley (42) and the second pulley (44) are
 sprockets. 30

5. The vehicle as defined in claims 1, 2, 3 or 4 char-
 acterized in that the bi-directional drive unit (48)
 includes a reversible electric motor (49), an electro-
 magnetic clutch (52) driven by the reversible elec-
 tric motor, and a drive wheel (50) driven by the elec-
 35tromagnetic clutch that drivingly engages the flexi-
 ble drive loop.

6. The vehicle as defined in claim 5 characterized in
 that the fixed linear guide channel (24) is attached
 to a vertical pillar (22) of the vehicle, the fixed linear
 guide channel (24) has an elongated vertical slot,
 and the follower has a universal connector (32) that
 projects through the slot. 40

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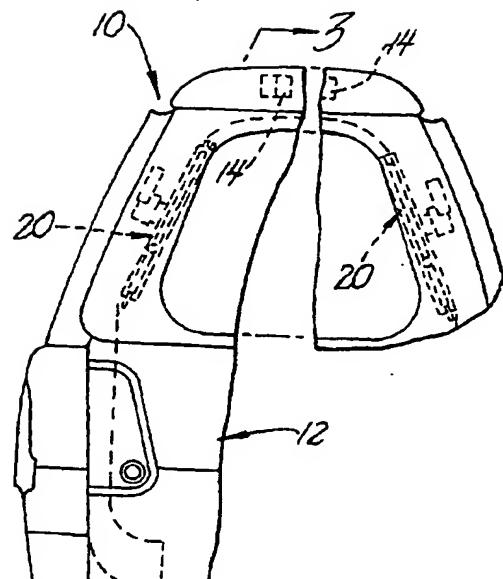


Fig. 1.

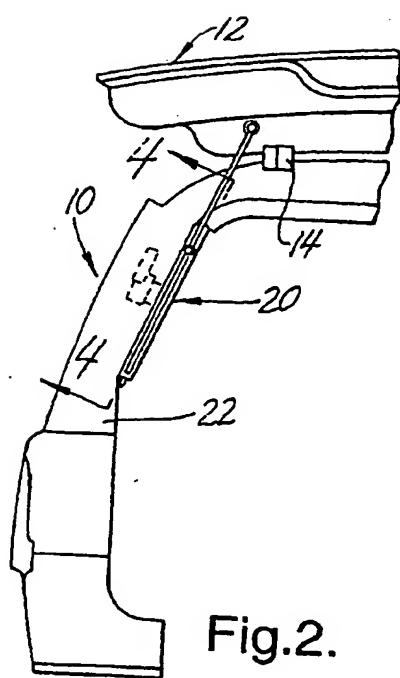


Fig.2.

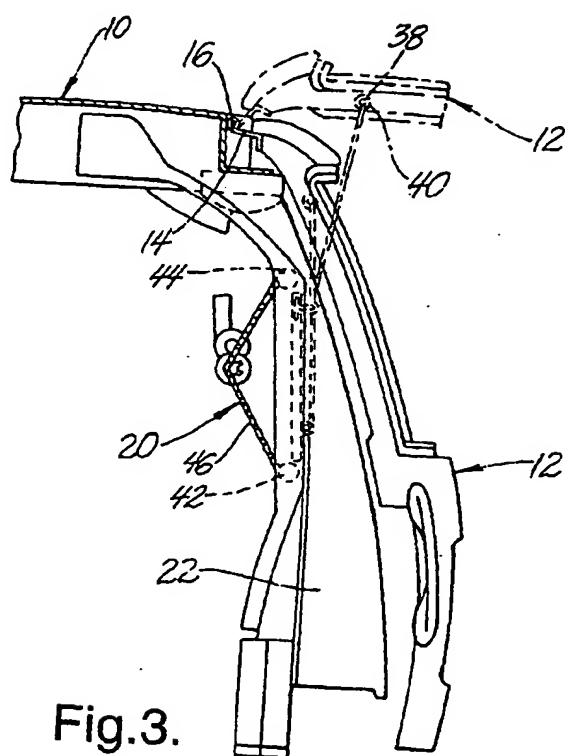


Fig. 3.

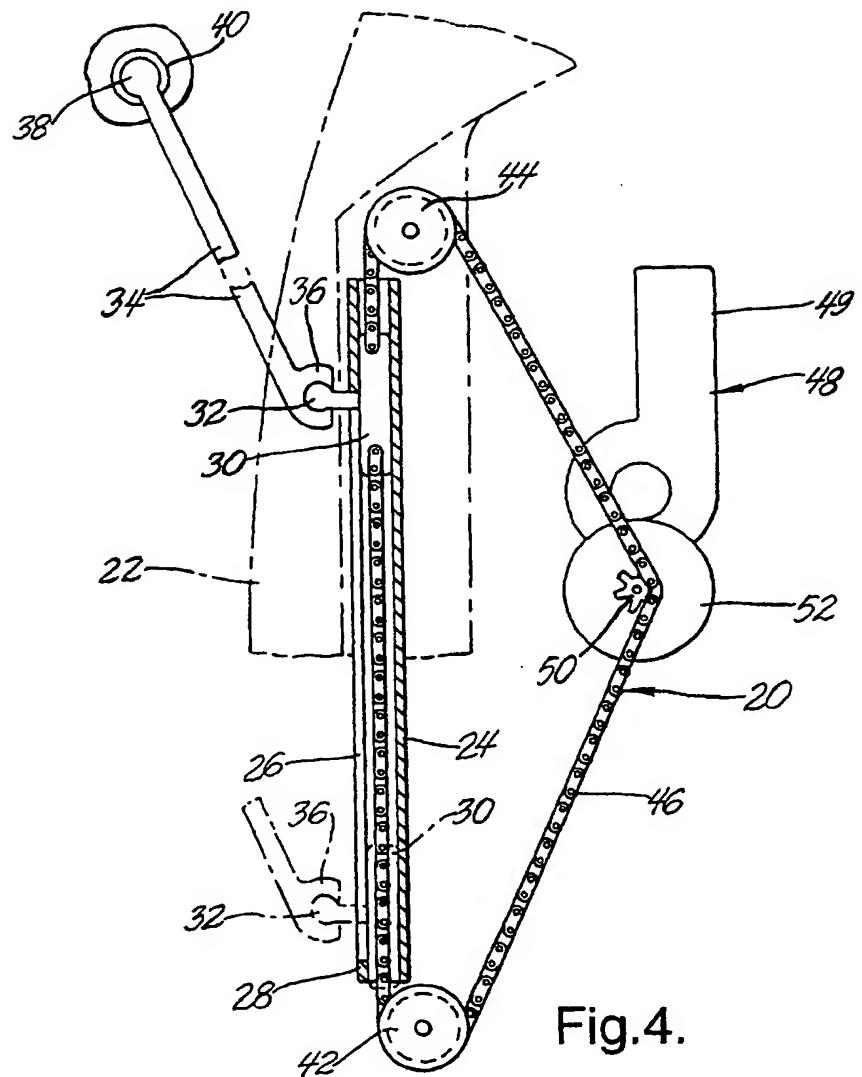


Fig.4.

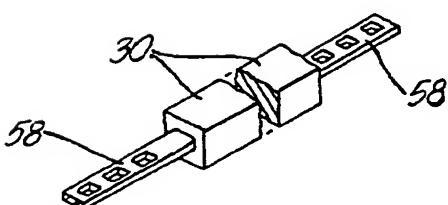


Fig.6.

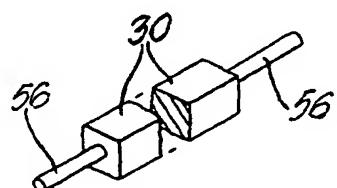


Fig.5.

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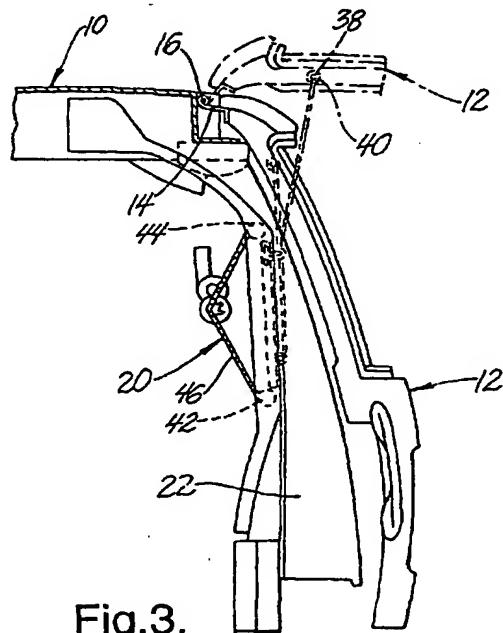


Fig.3.



European Patent
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EUROPEAN SEARCH REPORT

Application Number
EP 01 20 1009

DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT									
Category	Citation of document with indication, where appropriate, of relevant passages	Relevant to claim	CLASSIFICATION OF THE APPLICATION (Int.Cl.7)						
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Y	DE 196 15 021 A (EWALD WITTE GMBH & CO KG) 23 October 1997 (1997-10-23) * column 5, line 66 - column 6, line 13; figure 8 *	1,2,5,6							
Y	US 3 653 154 A (HAYDAY WILLIAM) 4 April 1972 (1972-04-04) * column 3, line 37 - line 49 * * column 4, line 21 - line 38; figures 1-4,11 * ----	3,4							
P, X	US 6 055 775 A (DERING TIMOTHY ET AL) 2 May 2000 (2000-05-02) * column 3, line 43 - line 52; figures 1-4 * ----	1,3,4	<table border="1"> <tr> <td>TECHNICAL FIELDS SEARCHED (Int.Cl.7)</td> </tr> <tr> <td>E05F B60J</td> </tr> </table>	TECHNICAL FIELDS SEARCHED (Int.Cl.7)	E05F B60J				
TECHNICAL FIELDS SEARCHED (Int.Cl.7)									
E05F B60J									
<p>The present search report has been drawn up for all claims</p> <table border="1"> <tr> <td>Place of search THE HAGUE</td> <td>Date of completion of the search 29 June 2004</td> <td>Examiner Guillaume, G.</td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="3"> <p>CATEGORY OF CITED DOCUMENTS</p> <p>X : particularly relevant if taken alone Y : particularly relevant if combined with another document of the same category A : technological background O : non-written disclosure P : intermediate document</p> <p>T : theory or principle underlying the invention E : earlier patent document, but published on, or after the filing date D : document cited in the application L : document cited for other reasons</p> <p>& : member of the same patent family, corresponding document</p> </td> </tr> </table>				Place of search THE HAGUE	Date of completion of the search 29 June 2004	Examiner Guillaume, G.	<p>CATEGORY OF CITED DOCUMENTS</p> <p>X : particularly relevant if taken alone Y : particularly relevant if combined with another document of the same category A : technological background O : non-written disclosure P : intermediate document</p> <p>T : theory or principle underlying the invention E : earlier patent document, but published on, or after the filing date D : document cited in the application L : document cited for other reasons</p> <p>& : member of the same patent family, corresponding document</p>		
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ON EUROPEAN PATENT APPLICATION NO.

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29-06-2004

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